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ABSTRACT

The Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) initiative seeks to provide students with discipline-specific skills they will need in order to succeed, first in the university, and eventually in their chosen professional careers. This goal is accomplished in an egalitarian framework: all students are educated in the conventions of "academic writing" in a wide variety of core and elective classes throughout the university curriculum. However, an assumption is implicit that an academic or professional group agrees, whether overtly or covertly, that specific knowledge sets and ways of making knowledge are in some way normative. The result often is that individuals or the knowledge they bring with them to a particular discourse community may be excluded. This exclusion may manifest itself in the case of students of color, women, or gay and lesbian students. Indeed, WAC approaches in the university which do not foreground the ideology and gender assumptions in the disciplines marginalize all students. WAC university programs, administrators, directors, and teachers need to be able to show students the deep structures, ideologies, and power relationships in the education they carry with them into their writing, careers, and lives. (Contains 65 references.) (PM)

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Critiques of Writing Across the Curriculum:

Current and Alternate Ideologies

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The Chapman Learning Community

at

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Critiques of Writing Across the Curriculum Ideology:
A Review of the Literature

Statement of the problem:
WAC as an "uncontested site"

Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs in university settings have been widely documented during the last nearly thirty years of their existence in the United States. [N.B. Years are enclosed parenthetically here to give a sense of the historical placement of WAC. After this section, the paper will return to the conventions of MLA style]. Researchers have examined program design (Dunn; Ferris and Smith; Fulwiler (1984); McLeod; Peterson; Sandler; Stout and Magnotto; Thaiss; Walvoord (1992, 1996); Yancey and Huot), teacher training (Amore; Anderson; Bertch and Fleming; Bradford; Cummins et al.; Hughes and Jensen-Cekall; Huot; Kinkead; Kuriloff (1992); Magnotto and Stout; Moran and Herrington; Odell (1992); Prior et al.; Rempe; Royster; Selfe; Walvoord (1997); Williamson), and pedagogical approaches (Abels; Anson; Barker; Bazerman (1987 and 1992); Emig (1977); Fulwiler (1992); Hansman-Ferguson; Haviland; Herrington (1985 and 1988); Odell (1991); Peterson; Rishel; Thomas;

Wajnurt). Apart from Malinowitz and Herndl, though, few composition specialists have discussed the ideological or gendered underpinnings and assumptions of WAC.

Project Focus: Suspension of Belief

This research project seeks to foreground the ideological assumptions of WAC, to assess the few available critiques, and given these critiques, to project implications for the future of Writing Across the Curriculum university programs. Particular focus questions for the research will include: What is the ideology of WAC? How is this ideology framed in composition studies? Are some student populations marginalized by the use of WAC in the university classroom, and if so, what groups are these? How does a virtual absence of critique affect/perpetuate this marginalization? Can critiques of WAC ideology inform future delivery of WAC university programs? As a composition teacher who has been a "believer" in teaching college students the conventions, discourse, research questions, and documentation in the disciplines, I want to critically examine the philosophy and pedagogy of Writing Across the Curriculum.

Review of the Literature: Prevailing WAC Ideologies

Barbara Walvoord, a central figure in WAC program administration and scholarship, in her 1996 article, "The Future of WAC", examines WAC as a "social movement organization" (58). This approach is possible, she maintains, "because of its change agenda and its collective nature—faculty talking to one another, moving to effect reform" (59). Walvoord situates the history of WAC ideology in its response to a nationally perceived crisis—"a widespread perception that student writing was inadequate" (61). WAC, she notes,

> was born in a time of increasing pressure for access by previously underserved populations. Faculty faced hard questions about the meaning of education, equality, literacy, democracy, diversity, knowledge, power and liberation (61).

WAC, in Walvoord's view, stands directly in the philosophy of a "liberation pedagogy" (62). As a liberatory pedagogy, WAC approaches seek to provide students with the discipline-specific skills they will need in order to succeed, first in the university, and eventually, in their chosen professional careers. This goal is accomplished in an egalitarian framework: all students are educated in the conventions of "academic writing" in a wide variety of core and elective classes throughout the university curriculum so that they are all, in a pluralistic society, afforded the opportunity to enter the professional arena, the world of work.

Two ideological stances underlying the uses of WAC pedagogy may be characterized as "learning the communities of academic discourse" and "the rhetoric of disciplinary inquiry." Helping students learn "discourse communities" in academic disciplines, notes Kuriloff, "socializ[es] students into the university…[and] introduces students to writing and thinking in a single discipline which serves as a model for how discourse works in any discipline" (485).

An early definition of "discourse community," which concisely states many WAC programs' continued understanding of what (and how) students should learn academic writing, is Herzberg's comment that a discourse community

> …is the center of a set of ideas…and is epistemic or constitutive of the group's knowledge (223).

For Herzberg, academic and/or professional groups both generate knowledge and define the boundaries of that knowledge, or at least concretize the nature of knowledge-making within the group. Harris notes that a sense of collaboration distinguishes a discourse community, in the group's

> ...stress...on a shared or collaborative project...only an affinity of beliefs and purposes, consensus, is left to hold such communities together. The sort of group invoked is a free and voluntary gathering of individuals with shared goals and interests—of persons who have not so much been forced together as have chosen to associate with one another...(15).

Harris' description certainly fits many academic disciplines and professional career groups. Bizzell draws on and extends Harris' definition by positing that a discourse community is:

> a group of people who share certain language-using practices. These practices can be seen as conventionalized in two ways. Stylistic conventions regulate social interactions both within the group and in its dealings with outsiders; to this extent "discourse community" borrows from the sociolinguistic concept of "speech community"...The key term "discourse" suggests a community bound together primarily by its uses of language, although bound by other ties as well, geographical, socioeconomic, ethnic, professional, and so on (222).

For Bizzell, a discourse community is **identified** by the ways in which it uses language, and acknowledges that professional groups use language in ways specific to them.

Bizzell claims that "access to academic discourse is a prerequisite for social power, and that linguistically disenfranchised students can be helped by a writing-across-

the-curriculum approach that seeks to demystify the conventions of academic discourse" (Bizzell and Herzberg 347). Though Kuriloff later points out the negative pedagogical implications of such an approach, her statement that "learning discourse communities socializes students into the university" characterizes this first approach in university WAC programs, and exemplifies the early WAC "liberatory" model (485). WAC becomes a method for initiating college students in the culture of the academy and of their future professions, through writing. This initiation is seen as positive and liberatory, because it gives students the discourse of "success," both in college courses and in future careers. Familiarity with the language of academic discourse communities gains students entrance to those communities.

Minock and Kirscht et al. opt, on the other hand, for a "rhetoric of inquiry," based in "work in the social construction of knowledge" (Kirscht et al. 369). Minock argues that the "...value of rhetoric [is] to provide transdisciplinary space for shared inquiry" (503). Composition pedagogy and WAC

> ...can be more resonant and meaningful to our interdisciplinary colleagues when they fall into place within...a series of dialogic understandings, where a constantly shifting focus of attention allows a larger whole to be grasped in relationship to its parts (502-503).

In this approach, student writers le[illegible] that "scholarly writing is argument on behalf of particular knowledge claims" (370):

> The disciplines are introduced as centers of inquiry rather than as banks of knowledge, and disciplinary conventions are presented as emerging from communally negotiated assumptions about what knowledge is and about the

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> methods for shaping it. The forms are conventions of the disciplines become, in turn, tools used consciously to aid students in moving beyond the boundaries of previous belief systems and in exploring new perceptions (Kirscht et al. 374).

Kirscht et al. maintain that this social constructionist approach in empirical research helps "students use a methodology instead of merely imitating a convention" because "they must struggle with both the demands and the constraints of that form" (377). This struggle does not seem to include students' examination of the underlying ideologies of the methodology. Though students are encouraged to be the "originator of questions, the selector and interpreter of data and the judge of significance" (378) and "mov[e] into…temporary places beyond the boundaries of old beliefs and conventions that mark movement toward greater inclusiveness" (378), it is not evident how they will do this without the questioning of ideological assumptions in the research.

Further, as Jones and Comprone point out, while "students should learn these conventions in ways that encourage them to fit their own intentions and the varying demands of rhetorical situations together in their writing" (65), teachers have "yet to develop" these rhetorical approaches to making knowledge across the disciplines (62). The "rhetoric of inquiry" frame outlined here, while offering student writers wider possibilities for learning and writing across the curriculum, still does not offer students the intellectual tools for addressing foundational assumptions in disciplinary knowledge:

- If disciplines are viewed as discourse communities, how do students learn to recognize competing claims within a single discipline/discourse community? Are students exposed only to the dominant claims in that discipline?

- How do students learn to begin examining published texts as possible examples of dominant discourse within a discipline? How does this skill affect their understanding of how writing affects knowledge production within a discipline?
- How do college students learn to identify the subtexts of power, ideology, and gender assumptions in the research body of each discipline? (How can WAC teachers teach students to uncover and examine these assumptions?).

Kuriloff points out how unequal power relationships between professors and students negatively affects students' understandings of themselves as full members of a discourse community:

> To make the idea of community work for students, more exchanges would need to take place. **Professors might think about learning their students' language** [my emphasis] as a prerequisite for requiring students to learn theirs (496-497).

Not only are students not truly admitted to the discourse community of the academy, yet are asked to write like members, but, as Anson notes,

> …many students do not share the beliefs and attitudes of their professors (quoted in Kuriloff 497).

Students may, as Kuriloff argues, "understand their discourse community as the community of students" (497).

Critiques of WAC: "Zones of Acceptance" and "Cultural Reproduction"

Harriet Malinowitz, in "A Feminist Critique of Writing in the Disciplines," holds that WAC programs do not even ask the important questions about the ideological/gendered assumptions of writing in the disciplines, let alone help students begin to answer them.

While recognizing the claims of the WAC movement to a liberatory, egalitarian pedagogy, Malinowitz notes an

> …aura of vagueness that surrounds most accounts of exactly what structures are being subverted, who benefits from these structures (and how), and, in short, just what sort of politics we're talking about (293).

Though she accepts claims that WAC approaches help students learn the discourse that will identify them as members of academic and professional communities, Malinowitz maintains that writing in the disciplines

> …doesn't help students critically assess how forms of knowledge and method are hierarchically structured in disciplines so that some achieve canonical or hegemonic status whereas others are effectively fenced out (293).

Implicit, for instance, in the Bizzell and Herzberg definitions of "discourse communities" is the assumption that an academic or professional group agrees, whether overtly or covertly, that specific knowledge sets, and ways of making knowledge are in some way normative. The result may be (and often is) that individuals or the knowledge they bring with them to a particular discourse community may be excluded.

Offering the example of the interdisciplinary and political formation of knowledge-making in women's studies and in gay and lesbian studies as fields outside conventional "zones and codes of acceptable scholarship" (291-292), Malinowitz emphasizes the importance of students' abilities to critique "dominant knowledge systems" (293). As students learn to examine "accepted" bodies of knowledge in disciplines, they can begin seeing how other forms of knowledge are excluded.

Students may also begin to see how they themselves are marginalized by WAC approaches which teach the conventions, research questions, and "accepted" ways of writing in academic disciplines. Gay and lesbian students, for instance, may find that research topics of primary concern to them—possible biological bases of homosexuality, or family patterns and genetics in families of lesbians and gays, for example—will be excluded because some WAC professors find these topics outside the range of conventional discussion in the discipline. This exclusion may take the form of gatekeeping—"No, that topic is outside the purview of this field," or "No, that topic is too political and this is a biology class". This exclusion may also manifest itself, in the case of students of color, or of women, in presenting academic discourse conventions which students know to be white- or male- (or white/male-) dominated.

For Malinowitz, when academic disciplines are approached as "centers of [rhetorical] inquiry" (Kirscht et al. 374), students do not learn how the "center of a field's inquiry is...negotiated...and established," or "which voices are engaged in (or excluded from) communal negotiations about the acceptance of idea," or what makes any domain a community" (295). Carl Herndl, in "Teaching Discourse and Reproducing Culture", offers a theoretical model for examining how this inquiry is acquired and negotiated.

Herndl critiques WAC from a stance he calls "cultural reproduction" (351). He argues that "research describes the production of meaning but not the social, political, and economic sources of power which authorize this production or the cultural work such discourse performs" (351). From a basis in Freirean radical pedagogy, Herndl maintains that education must "bring students to the point of cultural self-consciousness in which they neither accommodate nor merely oppose the social order...but can actively

reposition themselves within it" (351). The mode for such repositioning is embodied for Herndl in a concept of "resistance" (352).

Resistance and change are possible, according to Herndl, when "we recognize that…discourse is inseparable from…disciplinary knowledge claims and interests…" (352). We have to "face the fact that in teaching discourse we are unavoidably engaged in the production of professional and cultural power" (354). This critique acknowledges not only Minock's point about the obvious inequities in power relationships between professors and students, but the ways in which WAC, valorized as "programs that work," prevent students from examining how they can construct (rather than be told) their own positions of learning, writing, and thinking.

Herndl argues that WAC teachers must help students "see how discourse and the reality it constructs are shaped by the political, economic, and material interests of professions and the institutions they create" (354). While Herndl maintains that students should learn academic and professional discourse, WAC teachers must "identify and explain the way discourse is conditioned by professional practice…and has ideological consequences" (354). While Herndl does not enter into discussion of specific pedagogical means for transmitting these ideas, he feels that "if we describe the...conflicting sites…and multiple positions" of disciplinary knowledge, "we can open a space for students to recognize the range of positions negotiated and excluded from the dominant discourse" (355).

Malinowitz agrees with Herndl that this involvement in cultural/professional power positions when we approach disciplines as "centers of [rhetorical] inquiry" (Kirscht et al. 374), Malinowitz argues, does not help students learn how the center of a

field's inquiry is...negotiated...and established", or how much "deviat[ion] from "rigid banks of knowledge" ...is permitted", or "which voices are engaged in (or excluded from) communal negotiations about the acceptance of ideas," or what makes any domain a community" (295). She demonstrates how acceptance of disciplinary tests within a discipline "end up shaping and controlling *what* will count as knowledge in their field" (95).

A significant example of how texts become dominant in disciplines are studies both in composition research (Perry) and in developmental psychology (Piaget; Kohlberg; Erickson) which were based on the responses and experience of males. These studies became empirical models of knowledge, which were considered normative for both males and females. Carol Gilligan, in her watershed research on women's moral development, In A Different Voice, shows how this projection of male responses results in inaccurate and often dangerous assumptions about female attitudes and experience. Gilligan's work, and those of other feminist scholars in many disciplines, have precipitated a major reassessment of assumed "dominant knowledge" in composition studies and in developmental and cognitive psychology. These reassessments are strong evidence, according to Malinowitz, that "the supposedly communal assumptions of neutrality in objectivist data interpretation (which ignores the subjective experience of the investigator) permits sexist attitudes to infiltrate studies undetected and seriously affect results" (296).

If students are only made aware of dominant discourses, and other forms of knowledge and knowledge-making are not recognized, Malinowitz claims, "students are confined to writing only *across* the curriculum and *in* the disciplines, and it precludes

their writing *out* of the inherited order of things and *into* new forms of curriculum" (300). Judith Langer, in her study of the differences in the ways knowledge is theorized in a discipline and the ways that knowledge is taught in universities, notes that alternative ways of knowledge-making and thinking are reduced to matters of content and convention when transmitted to students (78-79).

For Malinowitz, then, WAC approaches in the university which do not foreground the ideology and gender assumptions in the disciplines marginalize all students. Learners who do not have access to the ideological bases of their education cannot transform or subvert societal inequities:

> The goal of feminist education has never been to prepare students to participate in the world as it exists; the goal, rather, has been to help them develop the skills to deconstruct and transform the world (310).

Further, for Malinowitz, suppressing alternate forms of discourse also results in the suppression and "subjugation" of women of color. Malinowitz notes that early feminist research, for example, "universaliz[ed] theories of white middle class feminists" (305). In doing so,

> ...white middle-class feminism had subsumed the diverse realities of women in its localized knowledge, thus distorting or erasing the experience of subjugated women, much as men had historically done to women (305).

A parallel could be drawn, though Malinowitz does not, at least explicitly, for WAC approaches. It could be argued that since the presence of people of color in the academic disciplines are still very small, the prevailing discourse domains and how

those domains are transmitted to students are not accurate representations of "minority" realities or knowledge.

An integral concern for Malinowitz becomes the foregrounding of subjectivity in the discussion of disciplinary knowledge-making and pedagogy. She views this subjectivity in terms of "hybrid identity"—"identity is not singular, but composed of multiple, interlocking strands" (305)—and "hyphenated knowledge"—"Marxist/socialist feminism, radical feminism, women-of-color feminism, lesbian feminism" are a few examples (307). "Canonical knowledge" (and it could certainly be argued that composition studies has already solidified such a body of knowledge) is displaced in favor of these subjective, hyphenated forms of knowledge (307). In this way, Malinowitz argues, the "foregrounding of process makes manifest rather than effaces feminism's discontinuities and internal disruptions" (308).

Malinowitz holds up this model as a way of reconfiguring WAC:

> Students should be helped to examine the extensive, though largely hidden hybridity of disciplines.... Faculty members in the disciplines [should be] direct with students about how disciplinary conventions and belief systems are structured, ...introduce students to the work of non-canonical as well as established members of the field, and...provide various frameworks for evaluating the reasons existing disciplinary margins and centers contain the particular inhabitants they do (309).

If the critiques of Malinowitz, Langer, and Herndl are intended to help teachers make university WAC approaches more inclusive for all students, and help students become

more aware of the nature of ideologies undergirding disciplinary knowledge, ideological implications must be explored, and possibilities, proposed.

Implications of Ideological Critiques of WAC

When students are marginalized by the programs intended to "liberate" them, then the critiques of Malinowitz, Herndl, and Langer (and, perhaps, this piece) have important ramifications for WAC. University writing programs—and this is another part of our rhetoric as compositionists—if they are to be liberatory for our students, must facilitate knowledge-making activities which evidence our often-repeated humanist principles of discovery, open inquiry, and real knowledge-making.

If gay and lesbian students encounter teacher or university resistance to their choice of topics, they learn the covert agenda: the academy is not, in fact, the place where it might be possible to construct new positions for themselves in their future professions and in society. When gay and lesbian students graduate and enter the job market, they may decide to accept the strictures on sexual orientation in their professions and discourses. But they can only do so intelligently and critically and still maintain their "newly constructed selves" as well as those professional "selves" if their university education has been a site for examining underlying ideologies, for understanding differing power relationships, and for permitting divergent views. If they are able to write and use their voices in academically and personally meaningful ways in the academy, sexual minority students will **make** intelligent and informed choices in their future professions, rather than be forced to choose between lesser evils.

If students of color are taught the hegemonic boundaries of disciplinary thought—boundaries that may also be racially drawn in terms of "occupied territory"—those

students may learn significant means for transforming those territories. If "learning the academic discourse" of a predominantly white field is, indeed, an important "career move" for students of color, WAC professors must be willing to expose disciplinary boundaries and epistemologies. Teachers who offer students of color the opportunity to critically assess what constitutes knowledge in their respective fields, give them real skills beyond learning the surface conventions and forms within disciplines. And as WAC programs enable women to examine how knowledge is generated and fenced by masculinist assumptions and generalizations, women students can begin to write in ways which make new forms of knowledge..

WAC programs begin to address these critiques when "what works" is not a strong enough rationale for perpetuating the ways in which WAC university programs are designed, the ways in which WAC teachers are trained. The exigency for WAC programs from the beginning—the need for a liberatory, equipping education for all students in a pluralistic society—is liberating now only as WAC university programs, administrators, directors and teachers are able to show students the deep structures, ideologies and power relationships in the education they carry with them into their writing, careers and lives.

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